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Friday's Feature
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Moles can be a hole lot of trouble

What's causing all those raised tunnels in my lawn? One common cause of saucer-size mounds of dirt and two to four inch diameter tunnels is moles. And everyone seems to have tried, or at least heard of, some kind of a home remedy. Unfortunately, home remedies and many chemicals are not effective in controlling moles. Moles can quickly spread from lawn to lawn and the use of ineffective control measures may actually make a mole problem worse.

To understand mole control, it's important to understand the animal. Moles are insectivores. They eat insects and soil invertebrates such as earthworms. They do not eat plants or plant roots. Some scientists actually consider the mole to be beneficial because they feed on things that can potentially harm your lawn like mole crickets, grubs, ants and slugs. Many homeowners however have a hard time appreciating the beneficial aspect of moles when their lawns are being tilled up.

The characteristic raised tunnels are actually created as the mole searches for food. They are capable of tunneling up to 18 feet in one hour. While this tunneling can be beneficial because it loosens and aerates the soil, it may cause some physical damage to your lawn's root system by lifting the roots and allowing them to dry out. Usually the damage is minor and mostly cosmetic. So, if you can tolerate the tunnels, one option is to do nothing.

If you find the mole tunnels to be intolerable, then mole removal may be justified. Trapping is perhaps the most effective method of mole control. Mole traps may be purchased at some garden centers. Traps should be set in active tunnels for maximum control. For more information on mole traps, review the UF/IFAS publication on Moles available online at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW080.

Another control option is to reduce the mole's food supply. The elimination of grubs, mole crickets and other soil insects will discourage the mole's tunneling. When used appropriately, insecticides can reduce insect numbers. The mole will become discouraged and move to an area with a greater food source. Always be sure to follow the product's label instructions. However, if your lawn is rich in organic matter and supports a large earthworm population (the mole's favorite food), then insecticidal treatments will not necessarily discourage the mole activity.

So how do you know if the mole is eating soil insects or earthworms? It's really very simple. Mix two ounces of a liquid soap in a gallon of water. Slowly pour the soapy water on the ground where there are new tunnels. Wait a few minutes. If earthworms are present, they will soon crawl out of the ground. In this case, insecticidal treatment will not be effective. However, if very few or no earthworms appear, then the chances are good that the mole is feeding on soil insects. In this case, insecticidal treatment may be effective. Contact your local Horticulture Extension Agent for an insecticide recommendation.

So put away the chewing gum, the mothballs, the hot sauce, the garden hose and the vibrating devices. These methods are not effective in controlling moles.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension